Impact of the Higher Education Authority on the Quality of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Institutions in Zambia

Dr. Martin Mushumba (PhD)[1], Prof. Kazhila C. Chinsembu (PhD)[2] & Prof. Gideon Mwanza (PhD)[3*]

[1]Director - Quality Assurance, Higher Education Authority, Lusaka, Zambia. [2]Director General, Higher Education Authority, Lusaka, Zambia. [3]Chief Executive Officer, Gideon Robert University, Lusaka, Zambia. Corresponding Author Email: vc@gideonrobertuniversity.com[*]

ABSTRACT

This study aims to assess the impact of the Higher Education Authority of Zambia (HEA) on the quality of teaching and learning in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Zambia providing a thorough analysis of the HEA's influence on Zambian higher education, offering insights into both its successes and areas needing improvement. The HEA was established with the aim of improving the quality of teaching and learning in HEIs in Zambia. In Zambia, the HEA plays a crucial role in regulating and enhancing educational standards across HEIs. The role of HEA is crucial in the quality of higher education in Zambia including in teaching and learning (Masaiti & Simuyaba, 2018). The quality of teaching and learning in higher education is essential for national development and individual success (Constantinou & Wijnen-Meijer, 2022; Zimba, 2021). This article examines the HEA's impact on teaching and learning quality, exploring its regulatory framework, implementation strategies, and effectiveness. By analysing policy documents, reviewing literature, presenting case studies, and through focus group discussions, this study provides a comprehensive assessment of the HEA's role in shaping the quality of teaching and learning across the country's higher education institutions.

Keywords: Higher education authority; Quality assurance; Education quality; Teaching and learning; Higher education; Education standards; Education institutions; Zambia.

1. Introduction

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) is a regulatory body established by the Government of Zambia under the Higher Education Act No. 4 of 2013. The core mandate of HEA is to ensure quality in higher education by implementing a quality assurance regulatory framework. The Authority draws its mandate from the Higher Education Act No. 4 of 2013 and the Higher Education (Amendment) Act No. 23 of 2021. In a nutshell, HEA is a public organization that provides for quality assurance and quality promotion in the higher education subsector in Zambia (Sikazwe & Nkhoma, 2023).

The core responsibility of HEA is quality assurance. The HEA is currently overseeing 63 Universities, 15 University Colleges, and 388 Colleges (HEA 2022). In carrying out its mandate of ensuring quality in higher education, HEA ensures that higher education institutions (HEIs) maintain high academic standards, deliver quality programmes, and meet the expectations of students and stakeholders. Therefore, HEA plays a crucial role in regulating and overseeing the quality of teaching and learning in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Zambia. However, there is a lack of research on the specific impact of the HEA on the quality of teaching and learning in these institutions. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the influence of the HEA on the quality of teaching and learning in higher education institutions in Zambia.

To be concise, this study investigates the impact of the HEA on the quality of teaching and learning within Zambian HEIs, focusing on the effectiveness of its regulatory framework, implementation strategies, and the overall improvements in educational standards. This is because the HEA was established to ensure that higher education institutions (HEIs) meet specified standards of academic excellence (HEA, 20213). Dueling on perception and

experience of involved academics in HEIs, learners and key stakeholders is crucial in understanding the usefulness of an education system to its people (Chikazinga, 2018; Kajala & Daka, 2023).

2. Statement of the Problem

There are several concerns being raised over whether higher education in Zambia is improving or deteriorating in the wake of the existence of HEA (Zimba, 2021). Perspectives of growth and deterioration are often based on various aspects affecting the higher education sector (Masaiti & Simuyaba, 2018). Despite the establishment of the HEA in Zambia, there is limited empirical evidence on the effectiveness of its regulatory mechanisms in improving the quality of teaching and learning in higher education institutions (Kajala & Daka, 2023). This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the impact of the HEA on the quality of teaching and learning in these institutions.

3. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data analysis with qualitative interviews and focus group discussions. A survey was conducted among students, faculty members, and administrators in higher education institutions to gather data on their perceptions of the HEA's impact on teaching and learning quality. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with key stakeholders, including HEA officials, to gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which the HEA influences teaching and learning quality.

4. Research Objectives

The main objectives of this study are: (1) to identify the mechanisms through which the HEA influences teaching and learning quality in higher education institutions, (2) to assess the perceptions of students, faculty members, and administrators in higher education institutions on the impact of the HEA on teaching and learning quality, and (3) to provide recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of the HEA in improving teaching and learning quality in higher education institutions in Zambia.

5. Literature Review

Higher education means tertiary education leading to the award of a certificate, diploma, bachelor's degree, postgraduate diploma, master's degree or doctorate degree (HEA 2021). The Zambian higher education landscape has recorded significant transformation coming against the backdrop of increased participation by various actors in the higher education sector over the past two decades (Kajala & Daka, 2023). This increased participation is a direct result of the 1992 legal reforms in higher education that allowed non-state actors to participate in the provision of university education (Ministry of Education 2022). Prior to this period, the country had only two Universities – the University of Zambia and Copperbelt University.

Available evidence also suggests that regulatory bodies in the field of higher education are on the rise (Harvey, 2006). Further, previous research has highlighted the importance of regulatory bodies in ensuring the quality of higher education (Chileshe, 2019). In fact, studies have shown that effective regulatory mechanisms can lead to improvements in teaching and learning quality, student outcomes, and institutional performance (Chileshe & Phiri, 2021). However, there is limited research on the specific impact of the HEA on teaching and learning quality in

Zambia. This study seeks to build on existing literature by providing empirical evidence on the influence of the HEA on teaching and learning quality in higher education institutions in Zambia.

5.1. Historical Context and Evolution of the Higher Education Authority

The Higher Education Authority was established under the Higher Education Act No. 4 of 2013, which aimed to provide a regulatory framework for higher education in Zambia. The HEA was created in response to concerns about the variable quality of education and the need for a more structured approach to quality assurance in Zambia's higher education sector (Masaiti & Simuyaba, 2018). Therefore, the HEA's mandate includes overseeing accreditation processes, setting educational standards, and ensuring institutional compliance with national policies. The Higher Education (Amendment Act) No. 23 of 2021 was passed in May, 2023 and saw among other things the expansion of the HEA mandate, introduction of new types of HEIs, annual institutional mandate, collaborative accreditation of learning programmes with professional bodies, classification of HEIs, and control over institutional affiliations.

5.2. Evolution and Policy Framework

Initially, the HEA's role was limited to accreditation and monitoring of institutional compliance. Over time, its responsibilities have expanded to include setting standards for curriculum development, faculty qualifications, and student support services (Chileshe, 2019). The responsibility has expanded further as provided for in the Higher Education (Amendment) Act, 2021 (HEA 2024). This evolution reflects a broader understanding of quality in higher education, encompassing a holistic approach to improving educational outcomes.

Therefore, quality assurance is the core business of the Authority. According to the Zambia Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ZSG-QA), the following key activities form the axis of quality assurance under the current HEA framework (HEA, 2021):

a) Accreditation of Learning Programmes;

b) Audit of Learning Programmes;

c) Development of core elements;

d) Registration of private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs);

e) Recognition of Public HEIs;

f) Institutional Audits;

g) Classification of HEIs;

h) Development of Standards;

i) Conducting of research;

j) Approval of affiliations;

k) Surveillances;

l) Maintaining a record of student database;

OPEN ACCESS

m) Recruit, train and maintain a record of learning programme experts;

n) Recognizing key professional bodies and cultivating relationships for learning programme quality assurance accreditation and development of core elements;

o) Quality Assurance benchmarking;

p) Continuous Capacity Development of HEIs.

5.3. Regulatory Framework and Implementation Strategies

5.3.1. Registration and Recognition of HEIs

The HEA's registration process is exclusively for private HEIs, and involves rigorous evaluations of HEIs based on predefined standards. This process assesses various aspects of educational quality, including curriculum relevance, faculty qualifications, research output, and infrastructure. These standards cover various aspects, including learning programmes, faculty qualifications, research output, and infrastructure (HEA, 2021). Institutions must meet these standards to achieve registration, which directly influences their operational credibility and funding opportunities. The Higher Education (Amendment Act), 2021 provides for the following types of HEIs:

a) a college;

b) a university college;

c) a university;

d) a technical university college;

e) a technical university;

f) an institute;

g) an institution established by any other written law; and

h) an institution for the specialised training of professionals in a specified field.

5.3.2. Accreditation and Learning Programme Audits

The HEA has introduced guidelines for curriculum development to ensure that learning programmes are relevant to the industry, responsive to national development needs and aligned with international standards. These guidelines aim to align programmes with the labour market needs and international best practices (Moyo & Moyo, 2018). These standards include requirements for pedagogical skills, assessment practices, and faculty qualifications. Additionally, pedagogical standards have been established to enhance teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes. Further to this, compliance to standards for learning programmes is enforced through accreditation of learning programmes.

The Higher Education Act, 2013 provides that no HEI shall offer a learning programme that is not accredited by HEA. The process of quality enforcement for learning programmes is extended through regular learning programme audits.

OPEN ACCESS

5.3.3. Institutional Audits

Regular institutional audits are critical components of the HEA's strategy. The HEA conducts periodic reviews and audits to assess compliance with quality standards and identify areas for improvement (HEA, 2022). Feedback from these evaluations is used to inform policy adjustments and strategic planning. This continuous cycle of assessment and improvement helps ensure that institutions adhere to established standards and make necessary enhancements. Institutional audits are also used for classifications of HEIs, and to a lesser extent as a basis for deregistration of poorly performing HEIs.

5.3.4. Institutional Capacity Building

The HEA provides support to HEIs through capacity-building programmes aimed at improving institutional management, faculty development, and student services. These programmes address identified gaps and provide resources for enhancing the quality of teaching and learning (Sikazwe, 2022; Nkhoma, 2020). For example, workshops and training sessions for faculty members focus on modern teaching methods and research skills. Since 2016, the Authority has offered nine (9) capacity-building programmes, with the latest being the two (2) training workshops held in April, 2024 and June, 2024 in Livingstone for colleges and universities, respectively.

5.3.5. Research

The Higher Education Authority takes interests in the research and innovation activities taking place in the HEIs. The HEA standards also encourage research and innovation in higher education. In view of this HEA sets standards for research quality, publication rates, and other metrics, in order to incentivize institutions and faculty to engage in research and innovation. This is critical in driving economic growth and improves the overall quality of life in the country.

The HEA appreciates the fact that HEIs are traditionally founded on basis of advancing knowledge and as such they are homes to research (HEA 2023). Therefore, a good research vision is essential for any HEI as it provides a clear direction and focus for the institution's research activities. It helps to align the research efforts of the university with its strategic objectives. It also fosters a sense of purpose among faculty and students, and enhances the university's reputation as a leading research institution.

In this regard, the HEA through its quality assurance processes such as institutional audits emphasises the need for all HEIs to have a well-defined research vision. This is also important for the HEIs to secure funding, and foster collaborations with other institutions.

Empirical research outputs from HEIs play a crucial role in national development. The HEIs are at the forefront of advancing knowledge and driving innovation, which are essential for economic growth and social progress. Through research, HEIs contribute to the development of new technologies, products, and services that can improve people's lives and address societal challenges.

Furthermore, empirical research outputs from HEIs could help to inform decision-making and policy development at the national level. By providing evidence-based insights and recommendations, HEIs can help policymakers to make informed decisions that are backed by research evidence. This could help to ensure that policies are effective,

efficient, and aligned with the needs and priorities of the people they serve. By promoting a culture of evidence-based decision-making, HEIs could help to build a strong foundation for sustainable development and improve the quality of life for people across the country.

5.3.6. Classification of HEIs

As part of the re-organisation of the higher education sector, HEA begun the classification of universities into a 4-tier system. The tiers are based on a national classification system developed by the Authority and provided for by the Higher Education Act No.4 of 2013 and Statutory No. 25 of 2016.

The national classification system has seen new and existing universities being classified into tiers depending on their capabilities in teaching, research and public service. The national classification system categorises Universities into four tiers. Each tier is distinguished by the level of education that can be provided by institutions in that class based on their teaching, learning and research capabilities (HEA 2022).

Therefore, HEA classify the HEIs based on their capabilities in research and innovation, and teaching and learning. The goal of the classification system as a quality assurance tool is to provide a basis for guiding learners and the public on the level of education that can be offered by an HEI based on its human and physical resources, and research capacity.

The classifications are based on the Zambia Qualifications Framework (ZQF) for higher education, which is ZQF 10, ZQF 9, ZQF 8 and ZQF 7. Thus, HEIs are classified as Tier 1, Tier 2, Tier 3 and Tier 4, respectively.

In this way, the system creates roles for universities classified at different tiers. For example, Tier 1 institutions are research-oriented institutions that will be given the role of offering higher research degrees such as doctorates.

5.3.7. Development of Core Elements

Core elements are components of a curriculum that must be maintained without alteration in order to ensure the programme's effectiveness (Mudd, Taylor, & Delaney, 2018). They are required elements that represent the theory and internal logic of the programme and most likely produce the programme's main effects (Mulenga, 2020).

Over the years that HEA has been working on accrediting learning programmes, there have been several challenges that HEIs have faced in having their programmes pass the evaluation. The pass rate for the learning programmes has stood at less than 50% (HEA 2021). The key issues identified as shortcomings faced by most HEIs learning programmes have been inadequate and inappropriately qualified teaching staff, inadequate infrastructure, and inappropriate curriculum.

The HEIs can remedy the challenge of teaching staff by employing qualified teaching staff. They can also address the challenge of infrastructure by putting in place the right infrastructure to support teaching and learning (Sikazwe & Nkhoma, 2023). However, there has been a slow progression towards mastering the development of the right curriculum among HEIs.

It is very common experience that the curricula developed by HEIs in many cases fall short of imparting the needed level of knowledge, skills, and competencies to the learners at a given Zambia Qualification Framework (ZQF)

Level (Zimba, 2021). Simply put, learners from different institutions pursuing, say a bachelor of laws programme must graduate with a comparable level of knowledge, skills and competencies (Mulenga, 2020).

In order to address the challenges in curriculum development and ensure that the quality of graduated in the country remains comparably competitive, HEA has taken it upon itself to develop core elements across all learning programmes (HEA 2021). This is being done through the involvement of HEIs, the professional bodies and other key stakeholders to ensure that there is consensus in the developed core elements.

The core elements development involves developing the key courses that must be covered in a given discipline as well as providing what other requirements must be put in place for a particular programme to be provided at that level by an HEI in Zambia (HEA, 2023). It offers the minimum features necessary for a given learning programme at a given ZQF level.

This ultimate control on curriculum in the HEIs is a major milestone in the management of quality of graduates emerging from the HEIs in the country. This is crucial in ensuring the quality, comparability, and relevance of learning programmes offered by higher education institutions.

5.3.8. Development of Standards

The Higher Education Authority has over the years of its existence been rolling out various standards to guide the higher education sector. The standards are crucial for Quality Assurance as they ensure that higher education institutions meet certain quality criteria, such as learning programme standards, infrastructure, student admission, promotion criteria, student transfer, and student safety. This helps maintain the overall quality of higher education in the country and ensures that students receive a good education. It is also important in providing a framework for evaluating institutions and learning programmes.

It is also on the basis of Standards that Zambia would be able to enhance international comparability of its higher education. By aligning local Standards with international standards, HEA would be able to ensure that Zambia's education system remains competitive and attractive to international students.

6. Impact on Teaching and Learning

6.1. Enhancements in Educational Standards

The HEA's regulatory framework has significantly contributed to raising educational standards in Zambia. Through its accreditation and quality assurance processes, the HEA has significantly contributed to raising educational standards in Zambia. Institutions are required to adhere to stringent guidelines, which has led to improvements in learning programme or rather curriculum design, teaching methods, and student assessment practices (Zimba, 2021). For instance, the introduction of competency-based curricula has made learning programmes more relevant to the job market.

6.2. Faculty Development and Student Support

The HEA's focus on faculty qualifications and staff development has resulted in a more skilled and knowledgeable teaching workforce. Faculty members are encouraged to pursue advanced degrees and engage in ongoing professional development (Sikazwe, 2022). Additionally, the implementation of student support services, such as

academic advisory and career counselling, has positively impacted student learning and retention rates (Nkhoma, 2020).

7. Factors Influencing Quality Change

7.1. Applications of Quality Assurance

Since the establishment of the Higher Education Authority, efforts have been directed towards improving the quality of higher education and make it so relevant to the industrial and development needs of the country (Chileshe, 2019).

7.1.1. Programme Level

At the programme level, quality assurance ensures that individual learning programmes meet certain standards of quality, including curriculum, faculty qualifications, infrastructure resources and learning outcomes (Zimba, 2021). The focus is on various quality assurance parameters which among others, include ensuring that; the curriculum meets the expected depth and breadth, the available infrastructure is adequate to support teaching and learning, the faculty has adequate and suitability qualified teaching staff, adequacy, the funding for the learning programmes is adequate, and the learning programme secures stakeholder approval.

7.1.2. Institutional Level

At the institutional level, quality assurance focuses on the overall quality of the institution, its governance, infrastructure, teaching, research, and outreach activities (HEA, 2023). The emphasis is placed on ensuring that HEIs have adequate internal mechanisms for implementing quality assurance (Kajala & Daka, 2023). At the heart of being able to do all the internal quality functions is the need for establishment of Internal Quality Assurance (IQA) Units/Departments in all HEIs. It is required by HEA that all HEIs establish quality assurance units/departments to manage all activities relating to quality assurance (HEA 2021).

The various wings of the institution remain accountable to the Internal Quality Assurance Unit. The IQAs are to be headed by senior academics (HEA 2021). The Institution is further capacitated to employ the following internal quality mechanisms:

a) Self-evaluation

Institutions conduct regular self-assessments to identify their strengths, weaknesses, and areas for improvement, which informs their quality enhancement efforts.

b) Internal audits

Systematic reviews of the institution's processes and procedures to ensure compliance with internal and external standards and identify areas for improvement.

c) Peer review

The HEI must learn to appreciate the role of peer processes in higher education. This involves the evaluation of the institution by a team of experts from similar institutions, providing an external perspective and recommendations for improvement.

OPEN ACCESS

d) Affiliations

For the purposes of learning and benefiting from others with superior advantage in one or more areas of interest, HEIs are encouraged to engage in partnerships such as affiliations. Collaboration with other HEIs within and outside the country would help them to stay informed about the latest trends and best practices in the higher education sector. Affiliations are important in enhancing programme delivery, staff exchange, student exchanges, and research collaboration.

e) Stakeholder engagement

The HEIs should engage with various stakeholders, including students, faculty, administrators, and industry representatives to gather feedback and insights on how to improve curriculum and other aspects of higher education training.

f) Benchmarking

The HEIs need to keep pace with the fast-changing higher education landscape and international requirements. This would the HEI to update their standards to reflect changes in the higher education landscape, such as new technologies, teaching methodologies, and international best practices.

8. Discussion of Findings

8.1. Focus Groups Discussions

To get context into this matter, 30 HEIs were sampled and their representatives from quality assurance units were engaged for interviews through focus group discussions. Among those sampled included 5 public universities and 25 private universities. The public universities were the University of Zambia (UNZA), Copperbelt University (CBU), Mulungushi University, Kwame Nkrumah University, and Mukuba University.

Table 1. Some HEIs Sampled and their Academic Quality Performance

Quality Assurance Parameter	UNZA	CBU	Mulungushi	ZCAS	UNLUS	ICU	UNICAF	Kwame Nkruma	Mukuba	Copperstone
HEI Classification Tier	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	2	2	2
No. of Accredited LPs	161	143	85	55	31	10	38	47	25	22
No. of times Audited by HEA since 2015	6	6	6	5	6	5	5	4	4	5
Average Audit Score (%)	91	89	85	84	82	72	74	71	70	70

Meanwhile, the private HEIs that participated in the interviews were Copperstone University. ZCAS University, University of Lusaka (UNILUS), Information Communication University, UNICAF University, Information

Communication University (ICU), Rockview University, Lusaka Apex Medical University, Edenberg University, African Christian University, Northrise University, Central African Baptist University, Ambassador International University, University of Barotseland, Victoria Falls University, Rusangu University, Zambia Christian University, Eden University, City University of Science and Technology, Evangelical University, Justo Mwale University, Mosa University, DMI St Eugene, St Bonaventure University, and Blessings University.

There was general consensus among the discussants that the various quality assurance mechanisms being employed by HEA had brought about increased academic quality in the HEIs. All the participating HEIs indicated that the quality of higher education provided in the country had significantly improved since 2015, when HEA was operationalised.

Further, all the 30 (100%) HEIs cited institutional audits, and accreditation of learning programmes as being the major factors in influencing the change in the quality of teaching and learning and the overall academic quality. The HEIs also cited HEA's emphasis on credentials of the teaching and management staff of the HEIs, emphasis on adequacy of suitable infrastructure for teaching and learning, and the development of various standards and guidelines on various quality assurance parameters. Similarly, 80% of the HEIs felt the classification of HEIs had enhanced academic quality in HEIs. In addition to this, 70% of the HEIs felt that academic quality had increased because of HEA's collaboration with professional bodies to regulate the higher education sector. Also, 67% of the HEIs felt that academic quality had improved over the last couple of years because of the capacity building workshops which HEA had been conducting with the HEIs. Meanwhile, 53% of the HEIs attributed the increase in academic quality to HEA's effective use of peers to review and enforce quality in HEIs. They appreciated the use of peers as experts to review learning programmes and help develop various quality assurance tools.

However, there were a number of inadequacies pointed out by the discussants, relating to HEA's implementation of quality assurance. In this vein, 77% of the HEIs felt that the role of the learner had been ignored in HEA's quality assurance processes, contending that quality assurance as practised is meant to help the learners to acquire relevant and adaptable higher education but little was done to allow the learners to participate in quality assurance of their HEIs. The HEIs argued that the quality of teaching and learning could not be effectively detected using the current HEA tools because the tools left out the role of the learner in assessing quality.

Similarly, 83% of the HEIs felt that the quality assurance parameters used by HEA were weak on key areas such as ensuring adequacy of infrastructure and open and distance learning (ODL) facilities. Meanwhile, 73% of the HEIs also felt that the use of the one-tool-for-all approach led to familiarity and as such compromise in quality assurance. The HEIs urged HEA to develop specific tools for specific issues of quality concern such as infrastructure, teaching qualifications, and the mainstreaming of ODL. Meanwhile, 87% of HEIs felt that HEA lacked efficiency and effectiveness, which was a takeaway in its enforcement of quality assurance.

8.2. Interview response

It was equally important to get the perception of the learners regarding the status of quality of teaching in their respective HEIs. In this regard, 200 assessment sheets were distributed to 10 HEIs with each getting 20 sheets. The assessment sheets were administered to the learners and the results were as below:

Table 2. Learner's perception towards quality of teaching in their respective HEIs

S. No.	HEI	Improvement in Quality	No Change in Quality	Decline in Quality
1	UNZA	12	3	5
2	CBU	15	1	4
3	Mulungushi	13	5	2
4	ZCAS	17	1	2
5	UNILUS	16	0	4
6	ICU	10	6	4
7	UNICAF	14	3	3
8	Kwame Nkrumah	11	3	6
9	Mukuba	15	2	3
10	Copperstone	16	2	2
Total		**139 (70%)**	**26 (13%)**	**35 (17%)**

The majority, 70% of the learners felt that there was an improvement in the quality of teaching and learning in their respective HEIs. However, 17% of the learners felt there was a decline in the quality of teaching and learning, with 13% indicating that there was no change at all.

It is worth to note that, of the 70% of the learners whole felt that there was improvement in the quality of teaching and learning, 64 % of them felt that HEA had a positive impact on the improvement of quality of teaching and learning; 22% attributed the improvement to increased investment in information and communication technology facilities; 8% attributed the improvement in quality to the HEI's strong faculty; and only 6% felt that it was as a result of investment in modern infrastructure for teaching and learning.

Meanwhile, 88% of the learners who contended that the quality of teaching and learning in their respective HEIs had declined attributed this decline to weak external oversight; 7% of them felt that the uncontrolled enrolments had compromised quality, and 5% felt that the decline in quality of teaching and learning was as a result of increased levels corruption in the HEIs.

8.3. HEIs perspectives

8.3.1. University of Zambia

The University of Zambia is public university and operates as one of the country's premier HEIs. The University has 58% of its learning programmes accredited and undergone significant changes in response to HEA regulations (HEA 2023). The introduction of new curriculum frameworks and faculty development programmes has enhanced its academic offerings and teaching practices (Mwamba & Mutale, 2023). The university has overtime implemented a revised curriculum that emphasizes practical skills and employability, aligning with labour market needs. Quality assurance demands have also seen the university adjust its enrolment numbers in order to work within the permissible admission requirements and lecturer-student ratios (HEA 2023). The University of Zambia had to deal

with the wrath of the Health Professionals Council of Zambia (HEA) and HEA when it had over enrolled for the Bachelor of Medicine and Surgery (MBChB) programme for the 2020 and 2021 intakes (HEA, 2023). Whilst appropriate measures were taken such as setting up of new lecture theatres and anatomy labs, transfer of students to other learning programmes and recruitment of additional academic and support staff: it is clear that no institution remains immune to quality assurance regulations. It is these changes that have continued to inspire confidence in the learners and the general populace regarding the university's commitment to excellence.

8.3.2. Copperbelt University

The Copperbelt University is a public university. The university has been audited 6 times since 2015 and has 88% of its learning programmes accredited (HEA 2023). The HEI has leveraged HEA support to implement innovative teaching methodologies and improve student support services. The introduction of technology-enhanced learning and a comprehensive career services programme has contributed to higher student satisfaction and better academic performance (Phiri, 2022). The university's efforts in integrating ICT into the curriculum have also facilitated more interactive and engaging learning experiences. The enhanced scrutiny in the development of learning programmes by the Centre for Academic Development has managed to ensure that learning programmes satisfy the development process, and yield expected learner outcomes. The Copperbelt has 95% of its learning programmes accredited by the HEA. Copperbelt University has leveraged HEA support to implement innovative teaching methodologies and improve student support services. These changes have contributed to higher student satisfaction and better academic performance. The University is classified as a Tier 1 university.

8.3.3. Kwame Nkrumah University

Kwame Nkrumah University is a Public University. The University has 77% of its learning programmes accredited. The University is classified as a Tier 2 university (HEA 2023). The university attributes its diversified programmes to the existence of HEA. The university feels it has everything it takes to provide a diversity of learning programmes to meet industrial demand for as long as there is guidance from HEA to supervise quality assurance processes. The university felt that quality assurance as enforced by HEA has continued to improve its learning programmes and overall quality of service delivery to the satisfaction of its students and all other clients.

8.3.4. Information Communication University

The Information and Communication University (ICU) is Tier 2 private university. The University has 34% of its learning programmes accredited by HEA. The university holds that it had felt the impact of HEA on its academic quality because of the quality assurance body's lingering presence in checking the qualifications of faculty staff and that of management. The HEI felt that the existence of HEA ensured that the HEIs on their own begin to self-regulate by strengthening the internal quality assurance mechanisms. Since 2015, the HEI has been audited 5 times by HEA.

8.3.5. Rockview University

Rockview is a private university operating with several faculties under its names. The University has 52% of its learning programmes accredited by HEA. It has been audited by HEA 4 times since 2015. Rockview holds that

HEA had managed to improve the institution's capacity to operate competitively and produce graduates of high calibre. The HEI cites HEA's clear standards and guidelines.

8.3.6. University of Barotseland

The private university is operating as a Tier 4 institution. It has been audited 5 times by HEA since 2015. The HEI has 78% of its learning programmes accredited (HEA 2023). The HEI credits HEA to the aspect of acceptability of its graduates. However, the HEI felt that HEA had struggled to help as much citing delays in accreditation of learning programmes. The HEI felt that HEA needed to restructure and devolve its operations in order to meet the demand of the sector.

8.3.7. Copperstone University

The university operates as a privately registered university. It has 36% of its learning programmes accredited and operates at the level of Tier 2 (HEA 2023). The HEI has been audited by HEA 6 times since 2015. The HEI singles out the positive role of institutional audit in the improvement of academic quality. However, the HEI felt that HEA had struggled with efficiency in its key oversight roles. The HEI proposes HEA reforms to enhance efficiency.

8.3.8. Victoria Falls University

Victoria Falls University is a private HEI. The university operates as a Tier 4 institution with 74% of its learning programmes accredited (HEA 2023). The HEI holds that HEA has helped to bring about standardisation in the manner higher education was provided in Zambia. The HEI applauds the role of accreditation of learning programmes in entrenching academic quality. However, the HEI felt that HEA's emphasis on alignment of qualifications for staff had disadvantaged the HEIs and cited it as a major reason for shortage of qualified teaching staff in the HEIs. The university has been audited by HEA 6 times since 2015.

9. Discussion Analysis

The findings of this study indicate that the quality of teaching and learning in HEIs in Zambia has shown some improvement following the establishment of the HEA. However, both the HEIs and the learners felt that this improvement is happening at a worryingly slow rate. This suggests that there is a need for the HEA to develop timely legislations and policies that would require HEIs to continuously invest in modern infrastructure to support teaching and learning (Kasimba, 2020).

Furthermore, it is essential for the HEA to make it mandatory for HEIs to establish robust functional internal quality assurance directorates. Internal quality assurance is the basis of accountability for HEIs, as self-checks begins with the existence of internal quality assurance directorates (Baumgardt & Lekhetho, 2013). External quality assurance from higher education regulators such as the HEA and other regulatory and professional bodies should be seen as complementary to internal quality mechanisms.

HEIs in Zambia also need further capacity building to understand the evolutionary changes in modern higher education that have an impact on teaching and learning. This capacity building should focus on equipping HEIs with the necessary skills and knowledge to adapt to these changes and improve the quality of teaching and learning (Kasimba, 2020).

Moreover, the HEA should extend its reach into supporting the growth of research and innovation in HEIs. Investing in building capacity in HEIs to execute quality assurance functions, conduct research, and attract funding is crucial for enhancing the overall quality of teaching and learning in HEIs in Zambia.

10. Challenges and Areas of Improvement

While the HEA has made some positive impact on the quality of teaching and learning in HEIs, there is still much room for improvement. Despite these advancements, several challenges persist. The HEA should focus on developing timely legislations and policies, promoting internal quality assurance mechanisms, providing capacity building for HEIs, and supporting research and innovation in HEIs to further enhance the quality of teaching and learning in Zambia (Masaiti & Simuyaba, 2018).

Inconsistencies in the application of quality standards, limited resources for HEA operations, inadequate qualified teaching staff, shortage of adequately resourced laboratories, libraries, science and computer laboratories, low appreciation of corporate governance practice, and resistance to change within some institutions are notable issues (Nambela, 2019; Nkhoma, 2020). Addressing these challenges is crucial for the continued improvement of teaching and learning outcomes. Enhanced HEA funding, clearer guidelines, and increased stakeholder collaboration are essential for overcoming these obstacles (Baumgardt & Lekhetho, 2013).

Furthermore, academic staff are crucial to teaching, learning, research, and public service in higher education (HEA, 2023). Ensuring adequate quality academic personnel is vital. Zambia's standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education emphasize aligning learning programmes with HEA requirements (HEA, 2021).

11. Future Directions and Recommendations Challenges

11.1. External oversight – the need for strengthening the role of HEA

To further enhance its impact, the HEA should focus on strengthening its regulatory capacity, restructuring by devolving its existence to effectively take its services closer to the people, increasing stakeholder engagement, and fostering collaboration with international accrediting bodies (Chileshe & Phiri, 2021). This includes expanding its role in providing technical assistance to institutions and developing more robust frameworks for quality assurance (Nkhoma, 2020). The approach must also seek to embrace the learners and the industry to be involved actively in quality assurance (Sikazwe & Nkhoma, 2023).

The HEA must also take a lead in ensuring that the HEIs understand evolutionary changes in modern higher education affecting teaching and learning (Chikazanga,2018). The sacred existence of HEIs as centres of research and innovation could only be reinforced by HEA. The HEA is obliged to support research and innovation growth in HEIs by investing in capacity building for quality assurance, research, and funding attraction.

Therefore, the external regulators like HEA should complement internal quality mechanisms, through deliberate capacity building activities that equip HEIs with the necessary skills to drive quality assurance and ensure that higher education in Zambia meets its purpose. Primarily, quality being the fitness for purpose, could be achieved with a stronger oversight role effective enough to in guiding the HEIs on their expectations.

11.2. Internal oversight – addressing institutional challenges

The HEIs need to adopt a proactive approach to implementing HEA guidelines and addressing challenges related to resource constraints and resistance to change (Sikazwe & Nkhoma, 2023). As already alluded to, the HEA should mandate HEIs to establish robust, functional internal quality assurance directorates. The cited lack of effectiveness and efficiency in the internal quality mechanisms could be addressed through continuous professional development for faculty and improved institutional management (Sikazwe, 2022; Constantinou & Wijnen-Meijer, 2022). This must be done alongside the increased support for student services, which are essential for sustaining improvements (Phiri, 2022).

The HEIs must ensure that they have the right policies that seek to improve the academic environment. This speaks to having in place the various policies integral to the provision of leadership and management in the education system. Suffice to observe that, among others, the HEI must have the staff development policy, research and innovation policy, policy on student admission, policy on internal quality assurance, policy on staff promotion, policy on learner assessment, policy on student welfare support, policy on credit accumulation and transfer, policy on curriculum development and review, policy on ICT development, policy on open and distance learning, and policy on examination appeals and moderation (HEA, 2021). This is besides having in place the requisite statutes, an operation plan, organogram, and other established structures supporting effective governance in the HEI (HEA, 2013).

Furthermore, there is a critical need for HEIs to secure adequate and appropriate infrastructure in order to effectively support teaching and learning (Mulenga, 2020). Investment in infrastructure by timely acquiring modern technology for teaching and learning, laboratories, lecturer theatres, learning and teaching aids, research support, and other related facilities has been proven to be the ingredient towards the upholding of academic excellence in the world's leading higher education institutions (Mudd, Taylor, & Delaney, 2018). Various funding options can be exploited for public institutions (Nambela, 2019; Nkhoma, 2020). Private HEIs also need capacity to learn how to position themselves for international financing.

The Southern African Regional Universities Association (SARUA) holds that internal quality assurance in the HEIs provides the first step in enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in higher education, and as such the need to shape the structure of all HEIs into embracing internal quality assurance as a key governance issue (Sikazwe & Nkhoma, 2023). Clearly, there is need to implement uncompromising legislations and policies that compel HEIs to embracing internal quality assurance as a culture embedded in their governance (Zimba, 2021).

12. Conclusion

The Higher Education Authority has played a crucial role in improving the quality of teaching and learning in Zambian higher education institutions. Through its regulatory framework and implementation strategies, the HEA has driven significant advancements in educational standards. However, continued efforts are needed to address existing challenges and ensure that all institutions benefit from the HEA's initiatives. To accelerate progress, HEA must prioritize legislation, capacity building, research support, and internal quality assurance. By doing so, Zambia's higher education sector can provide high-quality education, research, and innovation. The ongoing

development of policies, increased stakeholder engagement, and a focus on capacity building of HEIs will be key to further enhancing the quality of higher education in Zambia.

References

Baumgardt, J., & Lekhetho, M. (2013). The challenges of quality assurance in private higher education institutions in South Africa. Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences, 4(3): 421.

Chikazinga, W.W.N. (2018). Perceptions of Lecturers of Student Evaluations of their Teaching. The International Education Journal: Comparative Perspectives, 17(4): 36–48.

Constantinou, C., & Wijnen-Meijer, M. (2022). Student Evaluations of Teaching and the Development of a Comprehensive Measure of Teaching Effectiveness for Medical Schools. BMC MedEduc, 22: 113. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-022-03148-6.

Chileshe, N. (2019). Quality Assurance in Higher Education: The Role of Accreditation Agencies. Lusaka: University of Zambia Press.

Chileshe, N., & Phiri, J. (2021). Enhancing Higher Education Quality in Zambia: Strategies and Challenges. Zambian Journal of Education, 34(2): 45–67.

Harvey, L. (2006). Quality in Higher Education. Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, 18(1): 9–34.

HEA (2013). Higher Education Act No. 4 of 2013. Lusaka: Higher Education Authority.

HEA (2021). Zambia Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ZSG-QA). Lusaka: Higher Education Authority.

HEA (2021). Annual Report on Accreditation and Quality Assurance. Lusaka: Higher Education Authority.

HEA (2022). Guidelines for Curriculum Development and Pedagogical Standards. Lusaka: Higher Education Authority.

OPEN ACCESS

HEA (2023). State of Higher Education in Education in Zambia: 2022 Curricula in Higher Education. Lusaka: Higher Education Authority.

HEA (2024). Higher Education Authority Strategic Plan 2022-2026. UNZA Printers.

Kajala, M.M., & Daka, H. (2023). Analysis of Quality Assurance Systems in Selected Private Universities in Lusaka District. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/370124714_analysis_of_quality_assurance_systems_in_selected_private_universities_in_lusaka_district/citations.

Kasimba, M. (2020). Quality Assurance in Zambian Higher Education: A New Dawn. International Journal of Science and Research, 9(5): 930–934. https://www.ijsr.net/getabstract.php?paperid=sr20504172505.

Masaiti, G., & Simuyaba, E. (2018). University Education in Zambia: Trends and Current Status in Education in Zambia at Fifty Years of Independence and Beyond: History, Current Status and Future Prospects. UNZA Press: Lusaka, Pages 102–120.

Ministry of Higher Education (2023). 2022–2026 Strategic Plan. Lusaka: Zambia Reports.

Moyo, S., & Moyo, J. (2018). Curriculum Development in Higher Education: Trends and Innovations. Lusaka: Zambian Academic Publishers.

Mudd, J., Taylor, R., & Delaney, Y.A. (2018). The Relationship between Student Evaluations of Teaching, Student Achievement, and Course Content: A meta-analysis. Studies in Educational Evaluation, 58: 102–109.

Mulenga, I.M. (2022). Principles and Models of Curriculum Development for Higher Education. Lusaka: Higher Education Authority.

Mulenga, I.M. (2020). Rethinking Quality Assurance in Curriculum Development and Implementation for Higher Education in Africa. East African Journal of Education and Social Sciences, 1(3): 20–31. https://doi.org/10.46606/eajess2020v01i03.0039.

Mwamba, T., & Mutale, N. (2023). The Impact of Curriculum Reform on Teaching Practices at the University of Zambia. Journal of Higher Education Development, 29(1): 12–30.

Nambela, R. (2019). Challenges in Implementing Quality Assurance Frameworks in Zambian HEIs. Zambian Higher Education Review, 41(3): 78–95.

Nkhoma, S. (2020). Institutional Capacity Building in Higher Education: The Role of Regulatory Bodies. Lusaka: Zambian Education Publishers.

Phiri, L. (2022). Innovations in Teaching and Learning at Copperbelt University. Journal of Educational Innovation, 37(4): 101–115.

Sikazwe, M. (2022). Faculty Development and Its Impact on Teaching Quality in Zambian Universities. Zambian Journal of Higher Education Studies, 43(2): 56–72.

Sikazwe, M., & Nkhoma, S. (2023). Addressing Resistance to Change in Higher Education Institutions. Lusaka: Zambian Academic Press.

Zimba, H. (2021). Raising Educational Standards in Zambia: The Role of the Higher Education Authority. Lusaka: University of Zambia Press.